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Soldiers of fortune believe US condones their activities

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WASHINGTON - They are, in the words of one US senator, members of the "wink and a shrug" brigade: soldiers of fortune from the United States and other Western nations who travel to Central America to fight the spread of communism there, believing that the American government condones, if not indirectly supports, their activities.

Since rebels began their struggle to overthrow the Sandinista-controlled Nicaraguan government in the early 1980s, their efforts have been joined in the field by dozens - by some estimates hundreds - of Americans and others from France and England.

In addition, several private conservative groups, one headed by a former US Army major general, have professed to have raised from Americans millions of dollars used to supply munitions and supplies to the Nicaraguan rebels who are referred to as contras.

Those efforts have continued despite the neutrality act that restricts US citizens from participating in a foreign war in which the United States is not involved.

The Central Intelligence Agency has been prohibited from participating in, or providing support to, the Nicaraguan conflict since it was disclosed in 1983 that the agency was involved in mining harbors in Nicaragua. In interviews during the past year, several Americans who participated in training and military exercises with contras in Nicaragua said they did so in the belief that the private organizations that sent them were funded by the CIA.

A spokesman for one of the organizations, Civilian Military Assistance of Alabama, said that while it provides trainers and nonlethal supplies to the contras, its work is in no way funded by the CIA. Two members of the Alabama group were killed in a helicopter crash on the Nicaraguan border in September 1984.

The Globe reported in July that a former CIA contract agent had been asked by the agency to fi-

nance the trips of several young men to go to Central America with a Civilian Military Assistance group to "bird-dog" their activities. Several members of the group, who travelled to Costa Rica to participate in contra-backed operations, were arrested and jailed. Two of them were sentenced to five years in jail recently for violation of Costa Rica's neutrality act.

The CIA denied that it had underwritten any of the activities of those, or other, soldiers of fortune.

"Congressional restrictions prohibit the agency from supporting the contras and we have not violated the law," a CIA spokesman said yesterday. Those restrictions, however, will soon be lifted as Congress this session passed a \$100 million aid package to the contras that permits CIA involvement in determining how the money will be spent.

One of those who has been involved in the private fund-raising efforts, retired Major General John K. Singlaub, said Sunday on the TV show "60 Minutes" that he clears his activities periodically with sources inside the White House and the Central Intelligence Agency.

Specifically, he said, the CIA director, William Casey, has "indicated approval, and he has been encouraging" to his work. The CIA and White House have consistently denied any involvement or association with the volunteer efforts, either fund-raising or military. However, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) said at a press conference yesterday that he did not think the Reagan administration was doing enough to crack down on the volunteers.

"It stretches credulity for anyone to think they could be operating out of Costa Rica or Honduras without the knowledge of US authorities," said Leahy, who is vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

Both Leahy and Sen. Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Intelligence Committee, said they believed the assertions from the CIA yesterday that the agency was in no way associated with the

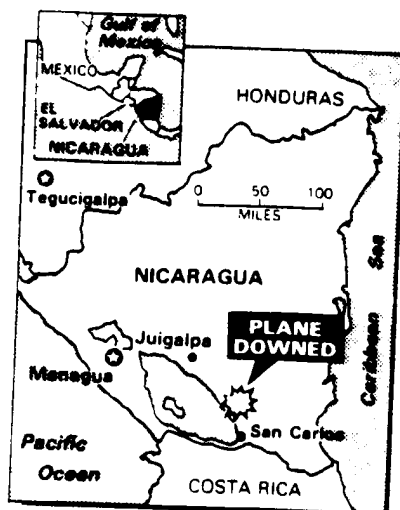
C-123 airplane that was shot down over Nicaragua Sunday.

According to the Sandinista government, two Americans were killed in the downed plane and another captured. The Sandinistas said the plane, downed 35 miles north of the Costa Rican border, was carrying weapons and ammunition for contras based in southern Nicaragua.

In a statement issued by the United States Council for World Freedom, which he heads, Singlaub yesterday denied involvement in the flight or knowing any of the crew on board.

However, Sen. John F. Kerry, whose office has spent much of the past year investigating allegations of CIA and White House activity in the contra effort, said the developments of the past several days need further investigation.

"We have to determine who is running foreign policy for this country," Kerry said. "Americans are dying now in Nicaragua and an American is captured there. We have to know who has the answers to what is going on down there."



PATRICK LYNCH / Los Angeles Times

have serious trouble conducting our foreign policy down there. Those people should know that they damage U.S. policy more than help it.

"I share the concern that, once you issue a credit card for so-called freedom fighting, you get a lot of people who want to use it," said Sen. Dave Durenberger (R-Minn.), the panel's chairman.

Several private groups that have provided supplies to the contras in the past denied any connection to this flight.

Retired Lt. Gen. John K. Singlaub, the most public of the contras' U.S. fund-raisers, acknowledged through a spokeswoman that he has organized supply flights in the past. "But he says this isn't one of his," Terry Swofford said.

Alexander M. S. McColl, who has organized private aid to the contras on behalf of Soldier of Fortune magazine, said, "All we know about this incident is what we read in the papers."

Denial From Aid Group

A spokesman for Civilian Material Assistance, a group that once sent U.S. trainers into battle with the contras, said it had no connection to the flight either. Two members of the group, then called Civilian Military Assistance, were killed when their CIA-supplied helicopter was shot down inside Nicaragua by Sandinista troops in September, 1984.

In January of that year, a U.S. Army pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Jeffrey C. Schwab of Joliet, Ill., was killed by Sandinista fire after his helicopter crossed into Nicaraguan airspace.